

Families in an Run-away World

by

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Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim wanted to contribute to this issue of IJCP because of their intellectual collaboration and close friendship with Pato. The three of them wrote about love and relationships in current risk society, and about the need to analyze them deeply in order to find alternatives that helped people live satisfactory lives today. Ulrich wrote once, in a preface for one of Pato's books, that his writing was atypically able to "join theory with critique and empirical research with praxis, in such a charming way that it grabs its readers and captures them under its spell" (Contemporary Sociological Theory, Peter Lang, 2001, p.ix). In a recent email, he only found adjectives to describe his collaboration with Pato. He told us, "I still see Pato as such a vital, wonderful, warm, and intelligent thoughtful person. His sudden death is, in fact, unimaginable".

When people, through their behaviour and the description of their own behaviour, widen the variety of their lifestyles, the observation perspective of the social sciences recognises a greater degree of diversity at the same time. In other words, the reflexivity of the modernisation process manifests in such a way that the classic description of the modern era itself becomes obsolete. Specifically, this is as valid in regards to social actors as in regards to the observation perspective of the social sciences. The functionalist consensus and the sociology of families that refers to Talcott Parsons include an apparent confidence in the knowledge about functional prerequisites of the roles of men and women, the relationships between children, between fathers and mothers etc.

The reflexivity of the sociology of family devalues this paradigm. Men, of course White men, conducted social science research on families until the first half of the 20th century. Today a majority of researchers are still White men. How-

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ever, other groups are now increasing and contributing to science. Therefore, they impose reflexivity onto family sociology, which includes diverse lifestyles in the people who conform science.

Women began this “by taking gender as a basic category of analysis, feminists have made important contributions to family theory” (Thorne 1982:2). Not all researchers on family sociology were or are in agreement with this statement. However, what today can be easily read could previously have been seen as revolutionary. When in the sixties and seventies in the last century research on women began, the mainstream family model had an opposite model. Would the family be a place for rest, feelings and privacy? No, people declared at the time. The family would be a place for work (women’s work), as well as a place for violence and daily pressure. Instead of “history” some talked about “herstory.” What was previously known as marriage turned into marriages. On the one hand, men’s marriage, and on the other hand, women’s marriage. Both of them could sometimes somehow overlap, although they had different horizons (Bernard 1976:19ff). Once and again theorists brought up the “daily experience of inequalities in families” (Rerrich 1990). “Because families are structured around gender and age, women, men, girls, and boys do not experience their families in the same way. Feminists have explored the differentiation of a family experience mystified by the glorification of motherhood, love, and images of the family as a domestic haven. Feminists have voiced experiences that this ideology denies: men’s dominance and women’s subordination within as well as outside of the family, and the presence of conflict, violence, and unequally distributed work within the ‘domestic haven’” (Thorne 1982:2). As a consequence of the critical reflexivity of feminist research on families, a movement sprang up in direct opposition to it. Antifeminist research on families, which saw families as “heaven in a heartless world” (Lasch 1977), rediscovered the progression of “[t]he war over the family” (Berger/Berger 1983).

The next stage of the reflexivity of family sociology itself started with the arrival of Multiculturalism, above all in the US and the UK. It was the moment for contributions from representatives of ethnic minorities. They criticized the fact that feminists’ move against research on women dominated by men was exclusive, one-sided and distorted. This denouncement rose up against a specific research project on women led by women; in this case it was women from ethnic minorities who objected. They claimed these researchers were White, middle class and heterosexual. A discourse on “the” family turned into an opposition between the different experiences of men and women. Then, there was a split in the proclaimed typical formula for the description of “sisterhood,” placing the diversity between women at the core of the issue. As a consequence of all of this, people voiced demands such as “White women listen (Carby 2000), and representatives of “Black feminism” pointed out the reasons why the relevance of the family for them was so different from the relevance of family for White women: “We would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us but we also wish to examine how the black family has functioned as a prime source

of resistance to oppression. We need to recognize that during slavery, periods of colonialism and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism... The way the gender of black women is constructed differs from constructions of white femininity because it is also subject to racism" (Carby 2000:83).

Not only the point of view of female observation but also the multiculturalist point of view (a name for the second line of reflexivity) affected the understanding of family research and the apparently definite empirical scientific understanding of it. As long as the popular ethnic minorities gradually monopolise the field of research, and the new migratory flows include more and more heterogeneous migratory families; as long as current researchers come themselves from families which have migrated or who belong to ethnic minorities, the consensus on families' research which had been taken for granted is then redefined. "More and more women, people of colour, lesbians and gays, and scholars from working-class backgrounds compose the academy. These scholars have challenged their exclusion by discourses that are presented as generic family reality, and some of us from the dominant groups who earlier saw families in a White, male, middle-class image have been listening and learning." (Marks 2000:611). The representation of families can also include the Anglo-Saxon standard families as well; this representation has not disappeared by any means, but its prevalence has been partially split (McLloyd u.a.2000). Where forms of consensus used to prevail, now there are only doubts. "Until we in the dominant group begin to unpack [the] invisible knapsack' of privileges (McIntosh 1988) that accrue to our race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, our progress... will be retarded or stalled. We will slip back, without awareness, into White-think, middle-class-think, men-think, hetero-think or some combination of these, and the erasure of key components of the everyday experience of people in non-dominant family arrangements will be inevitable" (Marks 2000:614). There are two lessons which should be learned:

- 1) The demand for objectivity in a voluntary or involuntary way is often used to legitimise and confirm particular definitions of power in relation to "proper" families. In other words: a sociology of family which is not reflexive, and which insists upon supposed "objectivity" in relation to the data and the definitions, threatens to become an ideology.
- 2) The subjective preferences and perceptions of researchers themselves need to be reflected. In that way it is possible to avoid constructing foundations for social sciences without utilising the category of observation. Therefore it is possible to embrace the changes in definitions that the members from different collectives and family constellations provide. This would help towards creating a "postfamily" research on families which is innovative and empirically aware.

Although many researchers are still unaware of this, there are a number of unavoidable questions: Is it possible to develop a sociology of family which is not simply composed of the mainstream and masculine society? How can we

produce research on families which does not ignore the fields, categories and principles of the “other”, and includes and gives space to the diverse life realities? The struggles and controversies for the recognition of diversity, the “politics of recognition” (Taylor 1992) have now reached research on families. Thus, an irritating, inevitable and uncomfortable question arises: “Theorizing Diversity: Whose Standpoint?”

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